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Ethics of Management in the Media—Necessity, Assumptions, and Consequences

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issue of ethics in media management, presenting it as a crucial element of both theoretical reflection and editorial practice. In the context of technological change and economic pressures, ethical principles become an essential point of reference for decisions made by broadcasters, editorial teams, and the media community as a whole. The authors analyze selected areas in which contemporary developments—including advances in artificial intelligence and the spread of disinformation—are reshaping the understanding of responsible media management. The article seeks to identify the directions in which media ethics is evolving and to assess its significance for the quality of social communication in a rapidly changing media environment.

KEYWORDS: public relations, ethics, media

STRESZCZENIE

Etyka zarządzania w mediach – konieczność, założenia i konsekwencje

W niniejszym artykule poruszono kwestię etyki w zarządzaniu mediami, przedstawiając ją jako kluczowy element zarówno refleksji teoretycznej, jak i praktyki redakcyjnej. W kontekście presji technologicznej i napięć gospodarczych zasady etyczne stają się istotnym punktem odniesienia dla decyzji podejmowanych przez nadawców, zespoły redakcyjne oraz całą społeczność medialną. Autorzy analizują wybrane obszary, w których współczesne przemiany – w tym rozwój technologiczny, taki jak postępy w dziedzinie sztucznej inteligencji i rozprzestrzenianie się dezinformacji – zmieniają rozumienie odpowiedzialnego zarządzania. Artykuł ma na celu zidentyfikowanie kierunków, w których ewoluuje

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etyka mediów, oraz ocenę jej znaczenia dla nieustannie zmieniającej się jakości komunikacji społecznej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: public relations, etyka, media

Introduction

Contemporary media are among the most powerful forces shaping public opinion and social life. They provide a space in which information, ideas, and values are exchanged and, at the same time, a setting where both the ideals of freedom and truth and the dangers of manipulation, disinformation, and the commercialization of human attention become apparent. The diversity of ethical issues in the media cannot be reduced to a simple catalogue of individual professional dilemmas or normative transgressions. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic and internally contradictory field of tension between universal ethical values, institutional interests, and changing technological and cultural conditions, all of which together shape communication practices in the contemporary public sphere.

The above observation indicates that one aspect of media ethics is the ethics of media management. It is a fundamental area of both theoretical and practical reflection, as it concerns the principles that guide the actions of broadcasters, editors, and the wider media environment under conditions of growing technological and economic pressure.¹ The aim of this article is to draw attention to this relatively unexplored research area, both in Polish and international literature, with particular emphasis on recent technological developments that have significantly transformed the media landscape.

Ethics of media management is a field of normative reflection devoted to managerial processes in media organizations and their influence on the form and content of media messages. It includes the analysis of managerial decisions that determine the creation, selection, and distribution of content, viewed from the perspective of responsibility for their individual and social consequences. In this sense, it examines the tensions between economic imperatives and the obligations arising from the media's public role, emphasizing the importance of reliability, editorial autonomy, and the integrity of decision-making processes. At the same time, it reveals the relationships between organizational structures, institutional interests, and the nature of media communication, thereby providing a basis for the critical evaluation of managerial practices and their public justification.

1 Although Denis McQuail, in *Theory of Mass Communication*, rightly distinguishes between "media management" and "media administration," for the purposes of this article we use the former term to refer to all management processes within and of the media.

Since the 1980s, there have been growing calls in Western Europe for greater ethical reflection in sensitive areas of social life, including the media. The starting point for scholarly reflection on media ethics was the assumption that the media are not a neutral technical tool but a space for human activity which, by its very nature, has moral implications. In this sense, media ethics—and, by extension, the ethics of media management, one of its integral aspects (Drożdż, 2013, p. 12)—should be viewed not only as a theoretical ideal but also as a prerequisite for the credibility and responsibility of the media as an institution of public trust.

The very concept of media management ethics, which is the focus of this text, appears in the literature as multidimensional and difficult to define unambiguously, combining organizational ethics, leadership ethics, and media ethics (Bivins, 2009; Croteau & Hoynes, 2014; Küng, 2008; Dietl & Gasparski, 2002; Kuraszko, 2014; Wolny-Zmorzyński, 2006). This undoubtedly reflects the specific nature of the media.² Together, these perspectives constitute three normative orders that intertwine, sometimes reinforcing one another and sometimes creating tension between them. Media management ethics is therefore not limited to declarations of values or compliance with formal standards, bbergut rather describes an approach to responsible decision-making in situations where the logic of institutions (goals, structures, procedures), the logic of leadership (power, influence, authority, and responsibility), and the logic of public communication (truth, reliability, pluralism, and the public interest) operate simultaneously. It therefore focuses on how media managers should resolve ethical dilemmas in practice, especially when economic, political, technological, or reputational pressures mean that there is no single “obvious” answer and decisions require the simultaneous consideration of principles, consequences, and responsibilities towards various stakeholder groups. In addition, it must respond to ongoing changes and the new moral challenges that arise with them. The literature offers a number of models of ethical media management that are helpful in this regard, including the humanistic model (Nierenberg, 2015), the personalistic model (Soczyński, 2019), and the model of the “sacred” triad (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016), which seeks to explain global media ethics. Two of these models are of particular relevance to the issues discussed in this article. The model proposed by Tsetsura & Valentini (2016) focuses on value as a core element in explaining ethical behavior. It identifies three main types of values—personal, professional and environmental—which act as driving forces in media

2 The specificity of the media is a complex and multidimensional issue relating both to the media market itself, as first discussed by Robert Picard (1989, p. 17), and to the structure and culture of media organizations (Nierenberg, 2011, p. 39), as well as to the diversity of professional specialties operating within them (Kozłowski & Piotrowski, Eds., 1997, pp. 363–369).

ethics and ethical media relations. The model suggests that, at the normative level, the ideal decision-making process in media ethics resembles an isosceles triangle, in which all three sets of values are equally important. However, the authors acknowledge that this balance may vary across different countries and contexts. Soczyński's model (2019), in turn, presents a media enterprise as an organization that is free yet morally obligated, whose primary point of reference is the human person and whose main task is to act in a responsible, professional, and socially engaged manner. We draw attention to these two models because of their universal character and their emphasis on broadly recognized values such as human dignity. This is important because, as many authors point out, values form the basis for the development of individual attitudes that shape decision-making behavior (Fritzsche, 1995).

Due to the dynamically changing socio-technological context, the models discussed are subject to continuous re-evaluation, which has become particularly intensive in recent years. As a result, they require systematic revision and adaptation to new operating conditions while preserving their universal axiological foundations. This is particularly important at a time when the media are undergoing a qualitative transformation that affects the very logic of communication, media economics, and editorial practice. These changes often generate tensions between quality journalism and media management. Their origins lie in the systemic pressures arising from these transformations, which reveal ethical conflicts that expose the tension between journalistic standards and institutional logic. The task of media management ethics is to seek solutions that minimize harm while maintaining the media's legitimacy as an institution of public communication.

The Dominance of Social Media in Everyday Communication

The first key area of recent change is the dominance of social media, which has fundamentally transformed the media landscape. These platforms have become the primary channels for communication and access to information. In 2025, more than 75% of Poles used social media, and the average user was active on six platforms each month (Report Digital Poland *Social Media w Polsce 2025*). The *Social Media 2025* report indicates that although Facebook and YouTube continue to have the largest reach among social media platforms (accounting for 30% of total internet user time), the importance of other platforms and more niche communication channels is growing rapidly (Report Gemius & Akademia Leona Koźmińskiego *Social Media 2025*).

A 2025 study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that social media have overtaken television as the primary source of news for users in the United States, confirming a broader global shift in the role and

significance of news media.³ The influence of traditional media has been declining for years, and this trend has now accelerated.

This change means that the media have ceased to function as a single institution and have instead become an ecosystem in which the boundary between broadcaster and audience has become increasingly blurred. Social media users are not only consumers but also co-creators of the information that appears in their feeds: they share, comment on, reinterpret, and contextualize content. In this platform-based environment, editors have lost full control over how their messages will ultimately be interpreted. At the same time, however, they remain responsible for the content that appears on their platforms. This gives rise to a new ethical problem: the media are responsible not only for the quality of the original publication but also for the “resilience” of the message to platform mechanisms such as abbreviation, polarization, and memification. Media managers, recognizing that platforms are not a neutral channels but environments with their own morality, should strive to create content that minimizes the risk of manipulative use without compromising the standards of truth and pluralism.

With the development of social media, we are also seeing the accelerating marginalization of traditional media, particularly television and the press as the primary sources of information. This shift reflects not only a change in where audiences consume content but also in how they understand information. On digital platforms, news is often intertwined with entertainment and increasingly perceived as entertainment. It is also becoming more closely linked to identity and more likely to evoke strong emotions. Media managers are therefore faced with the dilemma of whether to compete for audience attention by adopting the same logic. Which business model should they adopt to attract audiences? This dilemma is ethical insofar as it concerns the very definition of success: should the success of a medium be measured by the number of views and the resulting profit, or by the quality of the public debate to which it contributes? In practice, economic success often requires adapting to the logic of platforms, whereas serving the public interest may requires resisting it.

The Decline of Television and the Triumph of Streaming Platforms

Another important development, alongside the rise of social media and its assumption previously associated with traditional media, is the growing dominance of OTT platforms over cable and traditional television. Streaming has

3 Social media overtakes TV as main source of news in US, analysis finds. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/jun/17/social-media-overtakes-tv-as-main-source-of-news-in-us-analysis-finds?utm_source=chatgpt.com

become the dominant mode of video consumption. In the streaming model, viewers create their own schedules, while algorithms recommend content and this co-determine what people watch, in what order, and within what interpretative framework. As a result, responsibility for content distribution is increasingly shared. Particularly in the context of algorithms designed to maximize viewership, there is a risk that attractive content will take precedence over reliable journalism. This shift moves the focus from editorial ethics towards the ethics of distribution architecture. As media outlets become integrated into recommendation systems, responsible management requires the ethical description, tagging, segmentation, and promotion of content, as these processes are as important to ethical accountability as the content itself. Responsible media management therefore means ensuring that decisions regarding content distribution serve not only to maximize reach and viewership but also uphold reliability, transparency, and the media's social responsibility.

New Narrative Formats and Modern Business Models

Further evidence of the ongoing changes of the media landscape is the growing dominance of short-form video. Platforms such as TikTok, Reels, and Shorts have increased the time users spend watching video content, reshaping traditional narrative models. Their growing popularity, driven by quick editing and emotionally engaging narration, further complicates ethical dilemmas. The very nature of short-form content, often devoid of context, increases the risk of manipulation. By adopting this format and shortening content, media managers risk distorting meaning or creating a fragmented picture of reality which, although formally accurate, may be misinformation. In the era of deepfakes and generative AI, the ability to produce convincing synthetic content is developing faster than the capacity to verify it. Journalists themselves recognize the risks associated with AI development, pointing out that these technologies represent not only an opportunity but also a significant increase in the risk of misinformation, particularly due to the difficulty of detecting false content and deepfakes (Peña-Alonso, Peña-Fernández, & Meso-Ayerdi, 2025, p. 133). Moreover, the constant pressure to be the first to publish—even when information has not been verified—increases the risk of disseminating false material and, consequently, damaging a media outlet's reputation. Hence, the role of media management as a safeguard becomes increasingly important through robust verification procedures, competent editorial teams, investments in manipulation-detection tools, and crisis management through responsible communication and transparency with the audience.

AI Revolution and the Advent of “AI-Native” Editorial Offices

Undoubtedly, an important phenomenon beginning to dominate the media landscape is the growing importance and rapid development of AI tools. Between 2023 and 2025, AI-based technologies increasingly assumed the role of content creators, replacing tasks previously performed by employees in media companies and even editorial offices, where AI is used not only for content distribution but also for generating text and video materials, significantly contributing to the automation of editorial work. Research suggests that 2026 may be a turning point for editorial work. As 60–70% of costs incurred by traditional media are related to human resources, the AI-native model is becoming increasingly realistic. The future may therefore belong to media organizations based largely on artificial intelligence, reducing the cost of human involvement to 20–30% (LettsGroup, 2025, August 20). The traditional division between creation and distribution will also change, as artificial intelligence will enable the dynamic assembly of content from modular components (text blocks, images, video clips, and audio segments) that can be recombined for different audiences and platforms simultaneously. In social media, AI technologies will have also become part of the creation of materials such as graphics and video (AboutMarketing, 2025, December 10). Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the content itself will be automatically adapted to different platforms—from long-form web articles to short social media videos—without human intervention. Its structure, length, and complexity will also be adjusted based on audience feedback and engagement patterns in real time. These changes appear inevitable, and it is only a matter of time before they permanently reshape the media landscape which currently operates in a reality far removed from its foundations. The automation of journalism and content production is no longer a discussion about the future—it is happening before our very eyes. Since around 2020, we have witnessed the rise in so-called *automated journalism* (journalism generated by algorithms), in which AI programs produce short news items, data summaries, and informational content, accelerating the publication process and reducing costs. Modern technologies are used for writing, editing, transcription, translation, fact-checking, and even generating multimedia content (Banafi, 2024).

AI has opened up the possibility of building media organizations in which the previously dominant human labor cost can be significantly reduced. From a business perspective, this is undoubtedly an attractive prospect for managers, allowing them not only to reduce costs but also to accelerate production and increase its scale. From the perspective of the media’s social roles and functions, however, this raises a number of ethical management dilemmas. Research shows that despite its growing application in newsrooms and its impact on content creation, artificial intelligence requires proper management to prevent

ethical problems (Yuan, Shi, & Li, 2024, pp. 112–117). Since AI-generated content can be highly convincing yet contain errors or overgeneralizations, the first question concerns the quality of message in terms of its truthfulness and credibility. The risk lies not only in hallucinatory tendencies of current AI models, but also in the fact that AI produces a synthetic representation of reality. As a result, recipients cannot be certain whether the information presented to them has been verified or is merely a generated response that may be detached from reality.

In the context of generated content, a second fundamental problem concerns responsibility, or more specifically, the question of who bears responsibility for content produced by generative AI. From an ethical point of view, only a human being can be the subject of responsibility. As automation in the media increases and the role of humans declines, the responsibility of those leading and managing this process requires reconsideration. Closely related to this is the issue of transparency in the use of AI by editorial offices. The ongoing transformation of the media landscape, as social media are taking over the role of traditional ones, and the increasing use of AI raise questions about disinformation, content authenticity, and trust. For this reason, increasing attention is being paid to the ethics and transparency of algorithms (LettsGroup, 2025, August 20). Issues such as transparency, factual accuracy, source attribution, and the reliability of AI-generated content have sparked debate among media professionals and academics (Zhaxylykbayeva, Burkitbayeva, Zhakhyp, Kabylgazina, & Ashirbekova, 2025, p. 105). From the perspective of ethical management, this may become a strategic issue determining trust in a given media outlet. Therefore, ethics is becoming part of a broader discussion in the context of the use of artificial intelligence in the media (Noain Sánchez, 2022, pp. 105–121). Awareness of these issues is an important element of developing and implementing ethical frameworks in the media, which are still determining the appropriate scope of AI use. Rules and standards in this area are still evolving, and the whole process remains in its infancy, much like the technologies themselves.

In the context of these ongoing changes, another key ethical issue is undoubtedly disinformation, which has become a part of political, economic, and social struggles. The amount of disinformation circulating in the media is growing, and media organizations often face the dilemma of whether to report false information in order to expose it, at the risk of amplifying it, or to ignore it, thereby allowing unverified narratives to circulate. Ethical management therefore requires strategic decisions about when and how to respond, how to avoid repeating falsehoods, how to provide appropriate context, and, ultimately, how to strengthen audience's media literacy.

Conclusions

With this in mind, the coming years will provide a testing ground for developing ethical frameworks for media operating in this new reality. Moreover, media outlets that fail to base their activities on sound ethical principles may be displaced by technologies better suited to the changing environment. The media have become a continuous testing ground for data generation, enabling platforms and editorial offices to analyze user behavior and adapt content in real time. The shift towards social media, the creator economy, and video content is no longer merely a prospect—it is a reality. Traditional media are steadily losing their significance and are therefore forced to seek solutions that will enable them to survive. And these solutions are right next door, in a new reality that demands immediate change. Pioneers are gaining millions of users and page views, building their infrastructures, and may soon become key players in the media market. An example from the Polish media market is the Kanał Zero project, developed by Krzysztof Stanowski and his team, which has demonstrated in a relatively short time the potential to expand from YouTube into traditional broadcasting. It was the first YouTube channel in Poland to obtain a satellite broadcasting license from the National Broadcasting Council (*Kanał zero TV z koncesją satelitarną*).

Against this background, the role of leadership becomes particularly important. Interest in media ethics has traditionally focused on journalists and their individual consciences. In the new reality, however, ethics is increasingly a matter for leaders who define organizational goals, policies, resource allocation, relationships with platforms, and technology strategies. If they wish to act ethically, their decisions cannot be based solely on the survival of the institutions they manage. Such an approach would mean failing to fulfil the functions the media are expected to perform in society. This is, of course, not easy. It is necessary to establish a hierarchy of priorities when responding to the often conflicting expectations of stakeholders. Without such a hierarchy, decisions become arbitrary and susceptible to the influence of the most powerful actors, thereby undermining their ethical character.

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